

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST ECCLESIOLOGY AT FIFTY

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I.

Ecclesiology—how the church is understood theologically—has received less attention than polity in the fifty-year history of the United Church of Christ. Polity figured prominently in the founders’ deliberations. They formulated a system of governance, which is what polity means, affirming both the principle of local church autonomy honored by Congregational-Christians and at the same time incorporating the principle of synodical governance of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. This blended polity is we now call a polity of covenant.

Meanwhile ecclesiology was a major focus only in the forties and fifties of the last century when the founding documents were being written and adopted, and then again in 1991 with the work of an ecclesiology subcommittee of the General Synod Committee on Structure. To be sure ecclesiological questions emerged along the way, particularly around the development of a covenantal polity. But ecclesiology did not often become a church-wide concern.

It is puzzling that this United Church of Christ neglect of ecclesiology should have occurred in the same half-century when there was so much ecclesiological work in Roman Catholic, Protestant, and ecumenical theological circles. For Roman Catholics the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Church* was a fresh statement of Catholic theological teaching about the church as a “sacrament or sign of an intimate union with

God,”¹ rather than the church as institution, which was the emphasis at the first Vatican Council. Protestant ecclesiological work was driven both by ecumenical engagements (The Consultation on Church Union, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, bilateral and multi-lateral engagements such as the *Formula of Agreement* involving Reformed and Lutheran churches) and by a growing Protestant consensus that an ecclesiology of mission in the world could bring churches together without having to settle church-dividing conflicts. Ecumenically the 1950 Toronto statement of the World Council Central Committee on the churches and unity,² documents such as the *Consultation on Church Union* (1967), *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), and *Churches in Covenant Communion* (1988) contained important ecclesiological work. Even the growing partnership between the UCC and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) seemed to rest on commonalities of polity and justice action in society but to neglect real differences in the theology and practice of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, clearly ecclesiological issues.

It is also puzzling that the United Church of Christ should have neglected ecclesiology in the same half-century in which so many important scholarly works on ecclesiology were published. To name just a few, books like Paul Minear’s *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Augsburg, 1960), Avery Dulles’ *Models of the Church* (Doubleday, 1987), Letty Russell’s *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Westminster/John Knox, 1993), and Edward Schillebeeckx’s *Church: the Human Story of God* (Crossroad, 1991), appeared in those years.

¹ *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, General Editor (New York: the America Press, 1966), 15.

² *The Ecumenical Movement, An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, Editors (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 463-468.

I have been speaking of ecclesiological neglect, but a stronger word may be required. Avery Post, president of the UCC in the eighties, coined the phrase, “ecclesiological deficit,” to describe what many were calling a crisis of faith in the church in those years. Louis Gunnemann, in *United and Uniting*, used Post’s phrase³ to argue for changing the language of paragraph 15 (now paragraph 18 in the revisions of 1999) of the UCC Constitution from what he called sociological language to theological language when speaking of the church. Gunnemann believed that the language of voluntary associations and the whole Enlightenment philosophical understanding of the autonomous self and autonomous voluntary organizations did not properly represent what should be a theological understanding of the church as, first of all, part of the gift of divine grace, and only secondarily a humanly devised institution. As long as paragraph 15, with its language about the absolute rights of the local church remained in place, Gunnemann argued⁴, any wider ecclesial communion would be impossible, because other church bodies could not discern the wholeness or fullness of the church (understood theologically) in the United Church of Christ. I will discuss the questions of whether that was a sound judgment and a politically viable option in the conclusion of this article.

Another reason for this ecclesiological deficit could surely be traced to the current low esteem in which religious institutions or “organized religion” in general are held. Polls show that while most Americans believe in God and in a spiritual life, many of the same people are not attached to any religious institution, or view them with mistrust. These attitudes not only reflect the individualism and anti-institutionalism of American society, but also the fear that institutional religion inherently tends to become rigid and

³ Louis H. Gunnemann, *United and Uniting* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), 195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

dogmatic, fundamentalist, and in the end, violent. Even in liberal or progressive denominations welcoming diverse theological viewpoints, like the United Church of Christ, many participants value a local church as a useful adjunct to personal and family religious life, but they might hesitate if faced with the claim that believing in the church and participating in its life are core requirements of the gift and responsibility of divine grace.

The foregoing observations about the ecclesiological situation in the United Church of Christ lead me to proceed as follows in the rest of this article: First I will outline foundational UCC ecclesiological developments. Next I will describe three subsequent ecclesiologies emerging in the fifty-year history of the United Church of Christ, namely the ecclesiology implied in covenantal relations, the ecclesiology of a church focused on the mission of God, and the ecclesiological implications of the radical hospitality of the still-speaking God initiative. Finally I will conclude with an assessment of this history, the tendencies of these ecclesiological emphases, and what the ecclesiological future may hold.

II.

The founding (and enduring) ecclesiological affirmations of the United Church of Christ appear in the Basis of Union (1947, 1949), the Statement of Faith (1959), and the Preamble to the Constitution (1961). The Basis and the Constitution were voted by the Congregational-Christian congregations and Evangelical and Reformed synods as part of the uniting process. These votes give the Basis of Union and Preamble to the Constitution a formal and juridical standing in the United Church of Christ unlike any other statements—a standing also unlikely to be granted to future statements. More typically

the Statement of Faith was formally approved only by the General Synod but commended to the churches.

Though these three documents have their own distinctive theological accents, an ecclesiology anchored in confessing Jesus Christ is shared by all three. This foundation is most clearly expressed in the Preamble's words, ". . . [The United Church of Christ] acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior." The church consists of all those who ". . . share in this confession." Beyond the Preamble, in paragraph 10 of the Constitution, a local church is defined as a body ". . . composed of persons who, believing in God as Heavenly Father, and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness."

The Basis of Union (1947) statements on the church do not begin with the headship of Christ or confessing Christ, but with these words: "We acknowledge one holy catholic Church, the innumerable company of those who, in every age and nation, are united by the Holy Spirit to God in Christ, are one body in Christ, and have communion with Him and with one another. We acknowledge as part of this universal fellowship all throughout the world who profess this faith in Jesus Christ and follow Him as Lord and Saviour." (Sic) The confession of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church is clear in this section of the Basis, though it appears in the second, not the first sentence.

In the Statement of Faith (1959, revision of 1981) the parallel ecclesiological affirmation appears in the section on the Holy Spirit: "You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races." While this sentence may not seem as

confessionally explicit as those in the Preamble and Basis, it is set within a larger statement of the deeds of God “to which we testify,” thus giving the Statement of Faith a confessional character.

These three testimonies, appearing in the Preamble, the Basis, and the Statement, set forth the ecclesiological foundation of the whole church, including the United Church of Christ, in confessing Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. But an ecclesiology requires more than statement of the confessional foundation of the church. In ecclesiology the church is also a community with a defined purpose, a vocation, or a mission, about which these three foundational documents differ a bit. The Basis of Union says, “We hold the Church to be established for calling men to repentance and faith, for the public worship of God, for the confession of His name by word and deed, for the administration of the sacraments, for witnessing to the saving grace of God in Christ, for the upbuilding of the saints, and for the universal propagation of the Gospel; and in the power of the love of God in Christ we labor for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood.” (These latter phrases come directly from the Kansas City Statement of 1913, adopted by the National Council of the Congregational Churches.)

The Preamble says that the purpose of the church is to do “. . . its creative and redemptive work in the world.” In order to do this work, the United Church of Christ “. . . looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.” It is “. . . the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.” These statements emphasize the faith of the church and the believer, with

only the phrase, “creative and redemptive work in the world,” to express the whole of the worldly mission of the church. Paragraph 10, in Article V. on Local Churches, does add the affirmation that local churches “. . . are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness.”

The Statement of Faith locates the mission for the church in the redemptive deeds of God in Jesus Christ. The church, acting on its conviction that Jesus Christ conquered sin and death and brought about reconciliation, is called to join Jesus Christ in accepting the “cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table, [and] to join him in his passion and victory.”

According to this founding ecclesiology the United Church of Christ, the church is called into being by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the proper human response is to believe in and trust this good news and in that response to receive, among the gifts of faith, the gift of life in the covenant community of the church; and the life of the church, empowered by that same Spirit, is a gathered life of worship, community, education, and mutual care, along with a public life of the church where it proclaims the gospel, extends compassion and care, calls for justice and peace and works to achieve them.

At the beginning of this section on the founding ecclesiology of the United Church of Christ, I also said called it an “enduring ecclesiology,” though my use of parentheses around the word, enduring, discloses my doubts and questions. Is this founding ecclesiology truly enduring across the fifty years? I could quickly answer, yes, of course, if considering how this ecclesiology appears in UCC ecumenical engagements;

in the teaching of UCC history, theology, and polity; in the work of Committees on the Ministry as they examine local churches for UCC membership and candidates for authorized ministries; and in local churches where the Statement of Faith is used in worship or educational programs. But in other arenas of denominational life, I hear only faint echoes, or perhaps even no sounds at all from this founding ecclesiology. Why is that?

There are two major reasons for this loss of ecclesiological influence. One reason is the distance between current UCC denominational commitments—to being a multi-cultural and multi-racial church, anti-racist, just peace, open and affirming church accessible to all, where the still-speaking God requires radical hospitality for all those excluded from traditional religion—a distance reflected in both the content and tone of the founding ecclesiology, which is traditional, especially in its Christological centeredness, and which is less urgent in tone than the language used to state current commitments. These passionately held present-day convictions can surely be grounded in the founding ecclesiology, and just as surely need to be. But the founding ecclesiology does not seem to mandate current advocacies clearly enough. So why bother?

A second reason for a diminished power of the founding ecclesiology is to be found precisely in its centeredness in Jesus Christ. In liberal or progressive theological circles, like the United Church of Christ, the particularity of claims made for Jesus Christ—that God, the creator of the cosmos, was present in some unique or fuller way in the history of Israel; in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in the communities of his followers called the church—these claims strike many today as narrow, exclusivist, and chauvinist (whether of nation, race, class, gender, or orientation) so that they cannot

be supported. To add one more heavy weight to this burden of believing, the conviction that something truly changed (was actually redeemed or saved) in this history, apart from human believing or acting, stretches credibility to the breaking point. Therefore in the United Church of Christ (and other liberal theological circles), a preferred Christological construal presents Jesus as a courageous prophet, teacher and healer who was executed because his person and teachings threatened the powers of “empire.” His followers are called to follow his example. The world is changed as Jesus’ followers emulate his life and death, and in that sense, but only in that sense, is Jesus Christ the savior.

When there is hesitation nowadays in the UCC over the founding ecclesiology, when it is treated as surely an important historical moment but unfortunately burdened with language no longer able to express current commitments, these dynamics of traditional substance and tone contrasted with urgently expected ecclesial and social transformations, along with reconstructions in Christology, are the chief impediments to an affirmation and celebration of the founding ecclesiology, in which it would be treated as a rich resource for the church today, not as an obsolete or even embarrassing legacy.

III.

A different ecclesiological emphasis is implied in UCC perspectives on covenantal relations, though the word, covenant, is most often used to speak of the polity of the church—how the denomination is governed, and specifically how the several expressions of the church—local, regional, national, and worldwide—should be related to one another. This is an ecclesiology of call, mutual promises, and predictable consequences. God calls a people to a life of fidelity as set forth in the covenant itself

(laws, worship, the tutelage of divinely appointed prophets, priests and kings, social rules and roles), which, if kept, will bring blessing, but if broken will bring disaster. The formal structure of this covenant relationship, appearing at key points in the history of ancient Israel as narrated in the Old Testament, is carried over into the way churches, composed of followers of Jesus, understood their covenant relations with God to be in and through Jesus Christ, who became, in some readings of this history, the “new covenant,” with all the risks of supercessionism and anti-Semitism carried in that phrase.

Covenant theology was prominent in the Reformed and Free Church traditions following the Protestant Reformation, especially in the German Rhineland states, Holland, and among the English Puritans as well as in New England Congregationalism.⁵ And in the founding ecclesiological documents discussed previously, the word covenant appears in many places, though not carrying the freight of polity definition that it does now. Strangely, however, the word covenant does not appear in the original Constitutional paragraphs setting forth the parts of the church and their ways of being related. That oversight was corrected in the 1999 Constitutional revisions in which a new article, Article III. Covenantal Relationships, was added, stating that “Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission.” The first part of this sentence is concerned with polity or governance, but the second part sets forth an ecclesiology of fidelity to God’s mission.

The emergence of the idea of a polity of covenant, and then its ecclesiological implications, took place over the years as UCC church leaders worked at both blending

⁵ John von Rohr, in his book, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992) outlines the essential elements of this covenantal theology beginning on p. 28.

former polities and creating a new one. In *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*,⁶ Louis Gunnemann documented the polity negotiations leading up to the union in which Congregational-Christian representatives sought to protect local church autonomy while Evangelical and Reformed representatives pressed for creating something altogether new. Gunnemann laments the lost opportunity for creating a new polity at that time, but later he, and many other denominational leaders, began speaking of the polity of covenant as it developed in the UCC, distinguishing covenant polity from traditional polities like episcopal, presbyterial, and congregational. While the Constitution had always affirmed the obligation incumbent upon all parts of the church that each “. . . expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others,”⁷ this obligation had not been cloaked in covenantal language until the addition of the new Article III Covenantal Relationships was voted in 1999. Before that, though, the language used in the Manual on Ministry in its several editions was increasingly the language of covenant.

An ecclesiology of covenant, however, has not been developed as rapidly as have the polity implications of the principles of covenantal relations. But there is a beginning of such an ecclesiology in a draft document, *Manual on Church* (September, 2004) written and circulated by the Parish Life and Leadership Team in Local Church Ministries. This document draws from Preamble statements of the headship of Jesus Christ, the Statement of Faith listing of the purposes of the church, and the list of commitments (multi-cultural, multi-racial etc.) noted earlier. Three descriptions of the church frame this ecclesiology—beloved community, seeking justice, engaged in God’s

⁶ Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church Press, 1977), 34-36.

⁷ Constitution, Article III., paragraph 6.

mission. Then this draft document traces the biblical history of covenants, distinguishes between covenants and contracts, and discusses the spiritual maturity required to maintain covenant relations.

Whether these disparate elements and sources can be blended into an ecclesiology of covenant remains to be seen. While this draft document rightly speaks of God's covenant in Jesus Christ as a covenant of grace, the philosophical and theological problems surrounding covenant definitions are not addressed—such as, what are the actual blessings accompanying fidelity to the covenant, and what are the actual curses and sufferings that follow on infidelity? Old answers like military success and material prosperity, or a long life and good health, will not do. What then? Are there no consequences for failing to keep the covenant? Or are these unanswerable questions that must be left to a merciful God? Why then bother with the covenant if there are no demonstrable gains or losses?

Forcing a commitment to covenantal relations to bear the weight of a fully developed ecclesiology does not seem a fruitful undertaking. At present the UCC employs covenantal relations as a set of rules of engagement for all expressions of the church—local churches, associations, conferences, the General Synod and its related bodies. These rules are grounded in the conviction that each expression needs to hear, ponder, and heed the counsel of all other expressions. If practiced these rules would require an ecclesiology not unlike that of the Quakers, who believe that a discerning Spirit guides the church. These covenantal rules of engagement, if followed, would certainly foster a climate of mutual trust. But it would take much longer to come to a decision. And what if the rules are ignored or broken? We can admonish, face-to-face,

and occasionally do. But more often we complain and become discouraged about all those others who ignore or break the covenant.

IV.

The mission of God, *missio Dei* in Latin, as it often appears, grounds yet another ecclesiological emphasis in the United Church of Christ. Mission, or its plural, missions, has been at the heart of the Christian movement from its beginning—the conviction of being called and sent to bring the gospel message to any who may not have heard the good news.

In the modern era, however, missions often meant enculturation or colonization by Europeans and then North Americans, as political and economic interests joined forces with missionaries taking the gospel to Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australia. In the twentieth century, as international mission conferences were held (which along with conferences on Faith and Order and Life and Work marked the beginnings of the World Council of Churches), an awareness grew that church bodies founded by missionaries needed to become responsible for their own ministries and institutions, and to become equal partners with the church bodies that sent the missionaries in the first place.

A second growing awareness in the midst of the twentieth century also forced a rethinking of missions—the awareness that churches in Europe especially, but also in North America, accustomed to either legal political establishment as in Europe or to unofficial cultural establishment as in America, had come to be uncritically supportive of

morally questionable regimes. This was especially clear in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, but evident enough elsewhere.

A new understanding of mission (singular!) emerged from this history, mission understood as the church's calling to be an advocate for the poor and the oppressed, to be a prophetic critic of national military and economic power, and to work for the increase of justice and peace across the earth. This was understood to be God's mission; these were the places where the living God was at work, calling the faithful to leave their religious ghettos and enter the world as God's companions in liberating mission. Only secondarily was mission to be understood as conversion to faith in Jesus Christ by affiliating with some church. This was the faith that grounded mission, to be sure, but conversion to a particular church tradition was not the aim of mission.

This story of this change in the theology of mission is told in the book, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, by David J. Bosch (Orbis, 1991). He summarizes the new paradigm this way: "In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. . . . Mission is seen thereby as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. . . . There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. . . . To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love. . . . Since God's concern is for the entire world, this should also be the scope of *missio Dei*. It affects all people in all aspects of their

existence. . . . It takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church.”⁸

From its beginning fifty years ago, The United Church of Christ has understood mission in this “post-missionary” sense. UCC mission boards and programs have worked on improving conditions of life and fostering justice with compassion around the world, not primarily to secure the conversion of souls. UCC speeches, sermons, and writings have articulated this new paradigm in the understanding of mission. *Missio Dei*, however, has become a currently popular framing of this ecclesiological emphasis because of two recent events—the writing and adoption, by General Synod, of a UCC Mission Statement drafted at a 1987 mission conference, and a document from the General Synod Committee on Structure, “A Mission Framework for the General Synod Committee on Structure.”

The Houston Mission Statement affirms that in the UCC “. . . we seek within the Church Universal to participate in God’s mission and to follow the way of the crucified and risen Christ.”⁹ This introduction is followed by a list of eleven commitments, which include, “To embody God’s love for all people; To hear and give voice to Creation’s cry for justice and peace; To name and confront the powers of evil within and among us; To repent our silence and complicity with the forces of chaos and death; To join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation; . . .”¹⁰

⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 390-391.

⁹ *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, edited by Frederick R. Trost and Barbara Brown Zikmund (Cleveland, Ohio: the Pilgrim Press, 2005), 419.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The Mission Framework statement was prepared by the Committee on Structure, and included with its report to General Synod on recommended amendments to the Constitution and a time-line for these changes. This document includes a quotation from David Bosch, then a statement that “*Missio Dei* provides the basis framework for the structure of any church,” and that “The church, created by God for mission lives its vocation only when it is engaged in mission. *Missio Dei* implies that a theology of mission precedes a theology of the church. God called the church to do mission. Ecclesiology defines and orders the church for mission.”¹¹

Does this focus on the mission of God imply a particular or specific ecclesiology? Only in the sense, I would think, that the mission of God requires that any theology of the church view the church as primarily an instrument of God’s mission. If statements of belief about the church are not missional in their effect, then according to this viewpoint such statements are either meaningless or even harmful to God’s mission, since they would continue to sanction a church seeking to preserve itself as an institution, not engaged in mission for the world. Hence a *Missio Dei* ecclesiology would validate traditional aspects of church activity such as its sacramental life, pastoral care, education, fellowship, faith formation, and spiritual practices only as they could pass a mission test.

This instrumental classification of ecclesiology, making its statements less foundational than statements about God being mission or having a mission, seems to me both historically and theologically unwarranted. In the whole creedal and confessional tradition of the Western churches, the affirmation that the Holy Spirit calls the church into being seems just as foundational as all the other affirmations about God’s creative and redemptive work.

¹¹ “Report on Restructure to the Twenty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ,” 1997, E-3.

Related to this excessively instrumental view of ecclesiology are other philosophical and theological issues surrounding *missio Dei* that I have not seen addressed in the literature I know, issues about what it means to say that God is mission, or that God is on a mission when the living God is traditionally confessed as the source and creator of all that is, and that this living and loving God is at work providentially in all creation and human history to bless and guide all creation to its ultimate destiny of unity in love. To emphasize God as mission or God being on a mission would seem to open the philosophical and theological door to a duality or multiplicity of divine powers in contention—a good God and an evil God, or a good God and a fallen and evil world, for example. Such dualities appear in many world religious traditions, but the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions have insisted that there is just one God, the creator and judge and redeemer of all things. The immense power of evil evokes explanations designed to protect a loving God from authorizing or allowing evil, but understandable as that impulse is, the monotheistic religions have rejected its logic and, at their best, have acknowledged evil as a terrible mystery against which we must contend but which we cannot explain.

V.

The most recently developing ecclesiological emphasis in the United Church of Christ comes from the Still-speaking God identity initiative of the past three years, an initiative featuring television commercials, red and black identity items bearing a large comma, and a group of identity products (banners, posters, mugs, shirts, etc.) bearing a

quotation from comedian Gracie Allen—“Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” and the affirmation that God is still speaking. There is not a great deal of explanatory literature about this campaign, except for a few articles and speeches. The TV commercials and other items speak for themselves, using the visual imagery of a media culture, not the more typical verbal church pronouncements of earlier days.

From these still-speaking images, one can infer at least two elements of an ecclesiology nevertheless. Surely foremost would be the conviction that God calls the church to welcome and include all people, particularly those traditionally excluded or marginalized because of racial-ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender, disabilities, or socio-economic class. But after welcome and inclusion, what comes next? Presumably all the characteristics of church life would come into play—worship and sacraments, education, fellowship, service, working for justice and peace, etc. In the enthusiasm of this campaign, not much has been said about how churches would be changed if the excluded were to hear the call and enter the door or the church. Excluded and marginalized people would require a process of pastoral healing scarcely imaginable in scope. And new members from the margins might expect cultural changes—styles of worship or music or preaching for example—that would seriously challenge the culture of a church welcoming them.

A second mark of the church to be inferred from the still-speaking campaign would be its openness to new messages from the still-speaking God, or from the Holy Spirit, and these messages contradict traditional messages from some normative past time when God spoke decisively, but no longer speaks in that way. How do we tell if new messages from God are in keeping with scripture or tradition? Or does that even matter in

a still-speaking church? The current struggle in world Christendom over human sexuality, especially over the standing of persons of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender orientation—standing as persons born that way or following a chosen “lifestyle,” and standing as candidates for ministerial leadership—illustrates all too clearly and painfully the church’s difficulty in receiving new divine messages that seem to contradict traditional teachings. While the still-speaking initiative makes it plain that the UCC does not interpret the bible as texts once written by a God who no longer speaks that way, the initiative does not clarify persisting conflicts of interpretive authority except to give greater weight to new messages from the divine Spirit that offset earlier messages. That would make the implied still-speaking ecclesiology more Pentecostal in character—new gifts from the Spirit for the sake of the world and the church, not just the same old message cloaked in contemporary language. It is conceivable that this Pentecostal flavor of the still-speaking initiative might nurture a gathered church life where spirit impulses, such as those found in a Quaker or Baptist or Pentecostal meeting would be cultivated and received as Spirit gifts, not as troubling breakdowns of order. But in this kind of church meeting, the spirits still have to be tested. Not every message could be initially welcomed or eventually accredited. Quakers, Baptists, and Pentecostals have found ways to do that. It would be difficult, I think, for many UCC congregations to test the spirits rigorously.

VI.

To summarize and conclude this discussion of ecclesiology across the fifty years of the United Church of Christ, I begin with the observation that while the founding ecclesiology has worn fairly well and is often cited when we try to explain who we are and what we believe, the theological language and substance of the founding ecclesiology have not seemed to express well enough those emerging UCC core convictions about how we are supposed to live and work together (covenant), about how we are called to engage the world (*missio Dei*), and about how we are be led into new truth by the Spirit (still-speaking God). It is not so much an instance of new wine in old wine-skins. Rather it is an awareness of the profound differences in the church and world of today when compared with the situation in the mid-twentieth century. The founding ecclesiology exudes confidence in the core traditions of the Western Christian heritage, a confidence we would hesitate to embrace today in our pluralistic and contentious age, without listing all the required qualifications and exceptions and “however’s.”

I became keenly aware of this faintly obsolete quality of the founding UCC ecclesiology when I wrote, at the request of the Ecclesiology Subcommittee of the Committee on Structure, the first draft of a background paper, “United Church of Christ Ecclesiology,”¹² to be used in considering Constitutional revisions. I presented that draft to a group of consultants in August of 1990, and then to the full committee that December. My paper was based on the founding ecclesiology, though taking note of subsequent developments. Neither the consultants nor the committee took theological issue with the draft paper. But they also did not respond with any discernible enthusiasm, since the paper did not seem to articulate core UCC advocacies of those days with sufficient vigor and clarity. “Of what use then is ecclesiology?” seemed to be the

¹² “Report on Restructure to the Twenty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ,” F-2 to F-7.

question hanging in the air, especially when it had been hoped that addressing the UCC ecclesiological deficit would somehow clarify the structure of the church.

A second concluding observation: These four UCC ecclesiological emphases over the past fifty years—founding, covenantal, *missio Dei*, and still-speaking God—are not inherently incompatible, but are sometimes treated as though they were, or that one takes precedence over others. I know of four published efforts to challenge such exclusivism and to integrate the varieties of ecclesiology: My own speech (later short paper), “Three Ecclesiologies in the United Church of Christ” (three because the stillspeaking initiative had not yet arrived) given to the Council of Conference Ministers in July, 2002; a short article by John H. Thomas, General Minister and President at the time of this writing, delivered in 1997 under the title, “Theological Foundations for a New Structure;” the brief ecclesiology section in the draft Manual on Church mentioned earlier; and the book, *Evolution of UCC Style*, by Randi Jones Walker,¹³ in which she identifies themes of beloved community, covenant community, and mission of God as evolving ecclesiological themes in the UCC. In each of these, particularly in the Manual, the four ecclesiological emphases presented in this article are cited as parts of our UCC heritage and identity. More work on this theological frontier is urgently needed.

And a concluding observation: Louis Gunnemann’s judgment that Paragraph 15 (now 18) of the Constitution should have been written in the theological language of covenant rather than in the political language of human rights may be correct about what should have been done then, but any thought of rewriting that paragraph now seems Quixotic at best. Addressing the continuing UCC neglect of ecclesiology will require more than revised constitutional language. It will require a conversion of heart and soul

¹³ Randi Jones Walker, *Evolution of a UCC Style* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2005).

and mind to the church, to the actual church, confessing that the church is a gift of grace as well as a means of mission, not an impediment to mission. Whether such a conversion is possible in the United Church of Christ (as well as other mainline denominations) remains to be seen. It will not suffice to respond to declining membership and financial numbers by copying mega-churches in marketing for growth or the Emerging Church movement by deliberate de-institutionalizing and de-professionalizing church leadership. The conventional consignment of denominations and their churches to death while being replaced by new kinds of churches can make for inspiring rhetoric but not useful strategies for existing churches. Programs to renew congregational vitality may help but might not sufficiently address the lack of belief in the church except as an instrument for other purposes—whether personal spirituality or radical worldly mission.

In her research on vital mainline congregations,¹⁴ Diana Butler Bass concludes that their vitality is grounded in “an intentional and transformative engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices.”¹⁵ These churches discover what Bass calls “simple, but profound things like discernment, hospitality, testimony, contemplation, and justice.”¹⁶ The United Church of Christ has surely worked powerfully for justice in its history. We are trying to learn and practice a more inclusive hospitality. But we urgently need to strengthen our engagements with tradition, discernment, testimony, and contemplation. Paying more attention to ecclesiology would be a good pathway into these engagements.

¹⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

